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The Hindu Doctrine of the Atman



A LECTURE by
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The Hindoo Doctrine of the Atman.

SHOULD any of you ever have the opportunity of going to India, and especially the opportunity of familiar intercourse with its people, you will find that India is the land among all lands because God there seems nearer. It is a land full of peace, where from every particle of the dust there seems to breathe a spiritual atmosphere. You will note, in contrast to your own land, the peace and the serenity there, the gentleness of the people and their courtesy, and their general outlook upon life which is to consider this life as only an antechamber to the true life.

Yet India, that is so different now to your country, was once very nearly like your own civilization. Ten thousand and more years ago the Hindus were as white as you are. Indeed, by race, they are your blood brothers, for they are Aryans. They too came from that central Asian home beyond the Himalayas whence your ancestors travelled westward and settled in Europe. The ancient Hindus were, like the Greeks, full of an intense vitality, different perhaps from what you may note in them to-day. They were a people who lived very near to all the delicate influences of Nature, and like the Greeks believed that all Nature was alive, and that she was a manifestation of many Gods of the elements. The Hindus lived then a life full of vigour; they were a martial people. And yet they had a very striking characteristic, for all the time they felt life not merely as a manifestation of blind natural forces, but as a revelation of intelligences who were the embodiments of God.

The ancient Hindus then crossed the chain of the Himalayas and descended to the plains of India. There

they found a dark-skinned people, civilized but of a different temperament. There is little doubt that the Hindus, like most of the white warriors since then, would have wiped out all the darker people of the land except for the fact that there were too many of them. So they settled down among the darker people, inter-marrying with them, till the white complexion changed into the brown of to-day, though even to-day in Kashmir you will find descendants of the pure Aryans who are as white as most of you are, and whiter than some of you.

When the Hindus settled finally in India, they began to develop a civilization which was in many ways parallel to yours. They organized themselves into classes or castes. The caste of the teachers and priests and the caste of the fighters and administrators were the two highest. After that came the caste of the farmers and merchants. They all united, these three Aryan castes, in making a slave race of the original inhabitants of the country. As they went on living for thousands of years, there arose class jealousy, and class interests clashed one against another, just as they do in Western civilization. Religion, which was originally a simple worship of the powers of nature, became an intricate ceremonial. The Hindus never lost their faith that one God existed, but the many Gods became often mere dominating powers, evil in tendency at times, unless man propitiated them by sacrifice. So a priesthood arose inventing ritual after ritual to bridge the gap between man's helplessness and the seeming omnipotence of the Gods. Religion then became a complicated life of ceremonial, and soon all men were held in its coils till ceremonialism dragged spirituality at its heels. Slowly the priests built up all kinds of superstitions, such as that if you did a particular thing on a particular day, or unless you refrained from beginning business at a particular time, ill-luck would follow you. Of course you could propitiate the God of ill-luck in some ceremonial way, and so charms, talismans, rosaries, and all the paraphernalia of ceremonial religion came in its train.

But more pitiful than all these was the way that the original dark inhabitants of the land, because they were not so martial in spirit, were held in subjection by the Aryan Hindus. Indeed India at that time was beginning to go along the path of civilization which Western civilization has followed. The Hindus began to take as their axiom in life that men must struggle for their existence as the animals do, that the weaker men and women must be eliminated from life just as the weaker animals are eliminated by nature. There began a period where religion was

professed by well-to-do people with excess of ceremony, but at the same time they gave full expression to their desires for worldliness. There arose a callousness towards human suffering, and an exploitation of the weak such as you find to-day in Western civilization.

India would have completely gone just as Europe is going, just as Australia will go unless things change. India would have gone, but for a striking thing that happened. This was the discovery by the Hindus of a wonderful fact. Now this fact was so wonderful, so tremendous in its potency to change not only the individual's life but also the civilization of the world, that they called it *Rahasya*, the "Secret." It was treasured by the highest castes and shared only among a few even of them. This Secret would only be communicated to just a few, only to those who had lived a righteous life and could prove that they had fulfilled all duties which had been obligatory upon them. After a man had fulfilled his duties to wife and child and parent, after he had done all that was necessary in the cause of religion and of charity, then if when he came to old age, he still sought to know the great Secret, then only was he taught that mystery. The high born Hindus so surrounded that Secret with a ring of impassability that none who was not born a Hindu, who was not an Aryan of the ancient stock, was allowed to possess it.

What was this mysterious and wonderful Secret, whose discovery transformed all Indian civilization, and prevented it from running down-hill into the mire of fratricidal competition, and has made India what it is to-day? This Secret was the *Atman*. The word *Atman* literally means "self," and if I were to say in Sanskrit, "I myself did it," I would use the word *Atman*. But it is also used in another sense. It is used to denote something which is akin to God, but different from your Western conception of God. In your Western conception, there is an element of anthropomorphism which is absent from *Atman*. You cannot help thinking of God except in some kind of a form as a super-human, glorious Being; you think of Him often as a particular personality separated from the rest of the personalities of the universe. It is because of these ideas which you associate with God that to describe the *Atman* as God is only partially to express the truth which the word signifies to the Hindu.

But let me here read you some extracts from these ancient writings to show you what the Hindu sages meant by the *Atman*. It is the One Life, the one Principle behind all the multiplicity of phenomena, the Unity behind the diversity, not a vague abstract something but a conscious-

ness, a force, a personality even, if you would like to call it so, but so stupendous, so beyond all comprehension by our limited minds that the sages prefer not to call it He or She but simply THAT. For they felt that to speak of that Principle as God or Goddess was to impose a limitation which did not belong to it. Yet since, when they had to describe it, they had to use terms familiar to their hearers, they often used, besides the term THAT, the phrase Purusha, "The Man."

This great principle, this God, is in all things, at the heart of all things, the power behind everything. Thus the Indian sages sang of the Atman in the Upanishads.

This God, in sooth, in all the quarters is; long, long ago, indeed, he had his birth; he verily is now within the germ. He has been born, he will be born; behind all who have birth he stands, with face on every side.

What God in fire, in water what, what doth pervade the universe entire, what in the plants, what in the forest trees — to him, to God, hail and all hail!

He hath eyes on all sides, on all sides surely hath faces, arms surely on all sides, on all sides feet. With arms, with wings, he tricks them out, creating heaven and earth, the only God.

Whose faces, heads and necks, are those of all, who lieth in the secret place of every soul, spread over the universe is he, the Lord. Therefore as all-pervader, he is benign.

Without hands, without feet, he moveth, he graspeth; eyeless he seeth, and earless he heareth; he knoweth what is to be known, yet is there no knower of him; him call they the First, the Mighty, the Man.

Often the sages looked at the one Reality, the Atman, and tried to realize it in a personal aspect; then in hymns and psalms they addressed it as "Thou."

Thou woman dost become, and man, and youth, maid too in sooth; when old, with staff thy steps thou dost support; thou takest birth with face on every side.

Blue fly, green bird, and red-eyed beast, the cloud that bears the lightning in its womb, the seasons and the seas, beginningless, art thou. In omnipresent power thou hast thy home, whence all the worlds are born.

Alone within this universe he comes and goes; 'tis he who is the fire, the water he pervadeth. Him and him only knowing one crosseth over death no other path at all is there to go.

And so these ancient sages propounded the existence of the One. This wonderful transcendent Unity which is everywhere, this one conscious Power, makes all the stars to go in their courses; its power is in the tornado and in the waves of the sea which destroy; it comes as death that puts an end of life. Yet the Atman is full of love, and guards the young of animals, and brings into their mother's heart love and tenderness and the spirit of sacrifice. This Principle that is power is also love; it seems utterly ruth-

less, yet it is full of compassion. We see this universal power as we look at the heavens; by its ordination all things visible and visible work in harmony to make the universe.

Having thus stated the existence of the one Reality, the Hindu sages went one step further. They discovered that all the omniscience of God, all His omnipotence, all the wondrous things which we imply by God, exist in oneself, and that each of us is God. They taught the wonderful truth that the universe which is outside us is really within us, that as we suffer and object to the pain, that pain is itself a part of Atman, that is, a part of our Self. Nothing exists which is not ourselves; the sins which we commit, the evil from which we recoil, are in some mysterious way a part of us. All the great Teachers who inspire us are not outside us but are a part of us.

This wonderful teaching was the mysterious "Secret," and the sages stated this Secret in certain Mantrams or sacred phrases which could only be uttered in a whisper, so sacred were they. By many phrases the Hindu tried to make his mind recognise its relation to the Unity. One phrase is "Aham Atma," I am the Self. Daily the pious Hindu looking at the sun, the best symbol which he finds of the Self of the universe, affirms "So 'ham," I am He. He was given as the great clue to all things the phrases "Tat tvam asi," THAT art thou, and "Atmanam atmana pashya," Seek the Self by thy self.

To discover this great Self of the universe is possible only because it is within you. To seek it because it is yourself was the teaching given to the few. But that teaching learned by the few transformed Indian civilization. For to the few who believed it, who accepted it and tried to put it into practice, there were no interests of class or creed. What mattered all the strifes and the quarrels of the Brahmans against their opponents the Kshatriyas? What mattered the competition among men in business? Life was only one, and all men's deeds, good and evil, were the manifestations of the One Life. What mattered all the six great philosophies, when you knew that there was only one Truth, and it was within you? What mattered all the intricate religious ceremonies in which others were busy, when you knew there was only one Reality?

So knowing this great Principle, the Indian sage stood apart from life, surveying it tenderly, with charity to all who were immersed in the great illusion of the personal self, and yet refusing himself to take part in their ignorance. He saw that men lived in the world seeking their own self interests, that class was against class, that caste

was against caste, that each man tried to gain certain objects which other men wanted equally with him, and so the world was full of agony. The sage stood apart from all life, for it was but a shadow play in which men were the actors. He stood apart from all race pride or prejudice. What mattered to him whether a man were as white as the Brahman or dark as the original inhabitants of the land? What mattered if a man came from China or Africa? In all men was the same great mystery. White and brown and black and yellow, all these lived within him, and when a man came with a different complexion, why should the sage put on a superior attitude, since the great life of the Atman was equally within both?

This was the great teaching which modified India, for in India in the ancient days there were wise men who wherever they went took no part in the disputations of religion, took no interest in any quarrels between class and class. All the time they preached that there was one Reality, the great Self, the Atman, and that all the ideas which emphasised diversity were an illusion. If you think you are different from another man or woman, that is the illusion. If you think you are rich and have many possessions, and that another is poor, and that you have greater capacity than he, that is once again illusion. For the one fact is there is but one Atman, the Self. There is nothing outside that Divinity, and the sages went so far as to say that even in the gambling of the cheat is Divinity, for cheating too is an expression of the Divine Life. All men's activities, good and evil, are all expressions in manifestation of the one Principle, the Atman.

This did not in any way mean that men were to do evil and not seek the good. For as a manifested universe, the Atman revealed itself by stages to the mind of man. As men turned to good, they broke free from the trammels of the illusion, and tore themselves away from those evil actions which bound them upon the wheel of birth and death. Yet even that action must be impersonal. If you do evil, you must be born again on earth in order that you may suffer the pain which is the result of that evil. But whenever you do good seeking something for yourself, even heaven itself, then you, the individual who does the good, must be reborn to reap where you have sown. But beyond both good and evil is the Reality. And men who free themselves from their personal longings, and no longer seek things for their personal satisfaction, do good without wanting any reward because it is right to do good. The sage abstains from evil, not because he would reap pain, but simply because evil is impossible for the man who knows the Secret.

The result of this line of thought and action is illustrated by an incident which happened at the time of the Indian Mutiny. A holy man was seated in meditation in a certain place during that turbulent time when a British soldier came, and thinking perhaps that he was an insurgent, bayoneted him. The story goes that as this holy man saw the soldier coming at him with his bayonet, he did not flinch, but looked at him with calm eyes, and called out, "Even thou art He." For there is only one God, there is only one Reality; and if it comes as death, then you must accept the Reality as death as contentedly as you will accept it when it comes as happiness. This is the ancient teaching of India, that behind all things is the Unity, that all the diverse things of the world are an illusion.

Let us come back from those far-off days in India thousands of years ago, when men realized these truths, to our modern world where life is full of desire, where men prefer action at all costs to meditation, where there are clashes of interest between one person and another, where within each country, within each city, we have mutual warfare as our normal condition of life in the world. It is an ugly picture which comes before our eyes. Yet, said the ancient sages of India, there is ever the Unity. That Unity tries ceaselessly to assert itself, to impose its reality on men's hearts and minds. Now there are times in the world's history when it is easier for men to recognise the Unity than at other times. And such a time is now coming, where the inmost essence of the universe, the one Reality, is trying to come into men's consciousness and impose its ideals so that their life shall change.

Let me point out to you what is happening in the world to-day, because in all phases of human affairs, emotional or mental, political or commercial, this power of the Unity is beginning to manifest itself again. Consider what is happening in science. Go to any library and look at the shelves of scientific books, and you will find there volumes dealing with one branch of science after another, and you will see diversity on all sides. But to-day our leading scientists are probing into the Unity. Some years ago they stated that the Unity was matter, that all things were made out of matter, that all the varied forms could be resolved into one substance. But they have gone a step beyond, and they say now that all things which exist are a manifestation of one force, which is electricity. They say that the electron, the tiny particle of matter which is the ultimate brick of which everything is made, is nothing more than a charge of electricity. To the scientist, as he looks at all

the myriad forms in Nature, there is one Unity; the universe is only a whirl of electrons, charged with power.

Then look at the religious world. What characterises our religious world to-day? Certainly there are several religions in the world and hundreds of sects, but to-day groups of people are arising in each religion who are looking out of their religion to sense a larger World-Religion. There are thousands in every land who are tired of the limitation which religion imposes upon their realization of divine things, and who seek to know Truth as it exists in all religions. We call it the spirit of Comparative Religion, and the supreme embodiment of this new age is Theosophy, with its eager acceptance of every religious truth, past, present and to come.

In politics this spirit of Unity is driving men to realize that from now on it is impossible to carry on a civilization based on competition. They talk now of limiting armaments. Why? Because men are beginning to realize that with the development of modern commerce it is impossible to progress with the spirit of competition, for competition sooner or later drives nations to war. We must get together on a basis of co-operation, and this basis in its rudimentary form is shown in the League of Nations. Why does the League of Nations stand out as a dominating idea? Because it is the only way out of the world chaos into world order, and because the power of Atman, the Unity, is striving to manifest itself as the guiding principle in men's lives so that sooner or later all the nations will work as one Federation.

Consider next the transformation that business has had during the last twenty-five years. It is recognised that in these days of business economy men must combine so as to save wastage. We call such combinations trusts—trusts which perhaps just now are operated for the welfare only of the few. But presently they will be operated as the embodiment of the united life of the people. Why should such things as trusts come now into existence? Because the inner spirit of the world drives men to realise that, if the world's produce is to be handled economically, commerce must grow up out of little businesses of individual people to large organisations of groups. During the Great War which destroyed so much, one of the most constructive things happened in the world, and that was the co-ordination for a while of the trade and the commerce of the Allies by mutual agreements. During the war central boards directed all the commerce of the Allies; a central board directed the sale of wool from Australia, and a central board stabilized the finances of the Allies. Such central

boards made a success of things, because behind that experiment was the power of the Unity which is coming.

In literature to-day, the Unity is beginning to manifest. There is a breaking down of barriers of race and culture; men go outside their own land to understand the literary creations of other nations. We have to-day an intermingling of East and West. Japanese painting and drama are cherished in the West, and Western music is being developed in Japan. Eastern ideas are being studied in Europe and Western literature is spreading in the East. East and West are abolishing their boundaries in art, in literature, in music, because of the realization that the deeper things of literature and of art reveal the Unity.

To-day you will find a restless spirit among the nations, and thousands in each nation desire to travel, and if they cannot travel in ships they travel in books. There is a desire to understand the world, and a mysterious urge impels us to look beyond ourselves and survey the larger world outside.

That is the spirit of the world to-day. It is the spirit which is impelling men to break down the barriers of class, or caste, or of some particular business interest, and to associate in larger groups. This will go on steadily until there will be finally only one great embodiment of the life of humanity, and that is a Federation of the World, with a common organization, a common welding together of all that is noble and beautiful in art and literature.

I started by telling you how in ancient India they found a Unity, and that they presented it to men as the only truth. The man who professed that Unity was called the Sannyasi, the "renouncer," for he took part in no human institution which fostered difference. In India he was, and is, greater than kings. When this man who desires nothing, who has only a begging bowl with which to beg his food once a day from house to house, when the Sannyasi comes into an assembly of kings, they rise to do him honour, and they will not sit down until he gives permission. For he is the embodiment of the greatest Reality in the universe, and he lives to proclaim the Unity.

To-day each one of you is restless, is passing from one form of truth to another. You have many longings, and there is a craving and a hunger of heart, and you seek to know where is satisfaction. That satisfaction is in yourself. It is only in so far as you realize this great truth as to the Unity that you will find for the first time the satisfaction which you hunger for. So long as you look outside you to another, even if it be to a form of God which you place before you, before which you bow, which you worship

in uttermost devotion, so long as even God is without you, even if your hunger is satisfied there is bound to be sooner or later a hunger of heart once again. You will certainly find a satisfaction for the time as you worship Him without you; but such is the mysterious nature of God Himself who is in you, that after you have worshipped Him from without, and rejoiced in His Grace and Love, He vanishes once again, and you must seek Him once more. The search must ever continue, if you seek Him only without you. It is only when you find Him within you, giving His message from within, when you and He are not two Personalities but one Individuality, that then for the first time you find not only happiness but utter certainty as to Truth.

In our life to-day we are tossed back and forth between grief and joy, between hopes and longings and the limitations which our Karma imposes. We are like the shuttle thrown back and forth in a loom, and we are tossed hither and thither by desire. We resent suffering, for we feel it is a limitation, and we open our hearts to happiness because we think there is more of ourselves in happiness, and in all that is beautiful and attractive in life. We think there is nothing of use to us in the pain and in the limitation. It is only as step by step you learn the lesson of pain that you will stand steady in the middle, and will no longer be tossed hither and thither. When you realize that in the pain too is the mysterious Atman, the Unity, that pain only comes to you because it is a part of your past coming back to teach you a lesson, then will you begin to gain true happiness. Happiness does exist, but not the happiness which shrinks from an unpleasant thing. In the unpleasant thing the Reality exists just as in the pleasant. It is only when you have so solved the problem of the man who hates you, and whom you hate, that when he stands before you, you have not the faintest flicker of resentment, and can see him as he is and do justice by him, that you will come to the truth as to true happiness.

The greatest truth in life is that the Unity is in us. When from ancient India they tell you that you are God, that you are omnipotent, that there is nothing you cannot do if only you will understand your true nature, you may throw up your hands in helplessness and say, "How is that possible? I am a man, I am a sinner, I succumb to such and such temptations, how is it possible for me to say, to dare to say, that the Divine Nature is within me?" Let me read you here from "Light on the Path," to show how the power to affirm is within us.

Look for it, and listen to it, first in your own heart. At first you may say, "It is not there; when I search I

find only discord." Look deeper. If again you are disappointed, pause and look deeper again. There is a natural melody, an obscure fount in every human heart. It may be hidden over and utterly concealed and silenced—but it is there. At the very base of your nature you will find faith, hope and love. He that chooses evil refuses to look within himself, shuts his ears to the melody of his heart, as he blinds his eyes to the light of his soul. He does this because he finds it easier to live in desires. But underneath all life is the strong current that cannot be checked; the great waters are there in reality. Find them, and you will perceive that none, not the most wretched of creatures, but is a part of it, however he blind himself to the fact and build up for himself a phantasmal outer form of horror. In that sense it is that I say to you: All those beings among whom you struggle on are fragments of the Divine. And so deceptive is the illusion in which you live, that it is hard to guess where you will first detect the sweet voice in the hearts of others. But know that it is certainly within yourself. Look for it there, and once having heard it, you will more readily recognize it around you.

I say then seek this power of the Unity in yourself. You can remove a part of the veil of life's illusion by organising your life, by taking such advantages as exist in the world to-day. First of all, work with the current towards the Unity. I have shown that in the world to-day there is a mighty tide pressing all nations, all individuals to a sense of Unity. Go with the tide, work for something which brings men together. In your city, join some association, and bring men together. Join then some association which brings men and women together. Join a group which brings together diversified interests. Take part in work in your nation which takes you outside your nation to join with another nation. Give your sympathy and your aid to this spirit of Unity which is striving to manifest itself. Definitely be a soldier of the Unity, and fight against all that is handicapping the coming era of the Unity.

As you so swim with the tide, that tide will reveal to you the truth that all the wonderful things which the world contains are in you. Then as you look without and see this city of Sydney, which is so different from what you wish it to be, you will know that the city of Sydney is within you. Within you will move all the ferries, within you will exist all the diversified interests of men. You will discover that in some mysterious way there is a part of you greater than your present self which has its loving links with all that lives. That is the first step towards wisdom, towards the peace and the happiness which life has for you. Rise above the clashing interests of men. Seek within; look at the people round you, no longer as ciphers who have nothing to do with you, but rather as parts of yourself, strange parts in the trams, in the ferries, stranger parts in

the prisons. Do not be interested only in the fascinating part, the friend whom you love; but try to discover in what lies the mystery of attraction in him, and see if the mystery of your friend will not help you to understand the mystery of your enemy. For behind the friend and the enemy is the divine Atman, your own Self.

We all need to realize that the Way, the Truth and the Life are not outside us but within. And so I say, repeating the ancient message of India, Seek within. As in India to-day, which has existed for thousands of years while Empire after Empire has passed away, so shall you be. You will see your body growing old and you will know that age is a delusion. You will see death coming to you, and know that death is a laughable impossibility. You will look on death and see in death only the Unity, and when death comes asking you to put aside your body, there will be no body at all to put aside, for you will have sublimated that body into the Unity. All life is one; and only as you realize that the Way, the Truth and the Life are you, will you find the only great fact in life, the Unity. This is the ancient teaching.

Theosophical Society

President : DR. ANNIE BESANT.

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3. To investigate the unexplained laws of nature and the powers latent in man.

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